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ABSTRACT

Middle-grade students in the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) states trail their counterparts nationally, and increasing numbers of students are unprepared to do high-quality work in high school. In response to this situation, SREB and its member states formed a middle-grades consortium and developed a 10-point comprehensive improvement framework embodied in this guide. The guide's goal is to raise the academic achievement of all middle-grades students and to increase the percentages of students at the "basic" and "proficient" levels defined by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Areas of emphasis include a challenging, coherent academic core curriculum delivered in ways that engage all students in learning; high expectations reinforced through quality extra help for students and professional development for teachers; and a guidance and support system for students and families demonstrating that "every student matters." Steps are described for presenting a vision for change, characterizing a rigorous curriculum, identifying practices that need to change, selecting improvement priorities, developing and implementing an improvement plan, and creating a climate for continuous improvement. An action-plan format, sample action plan, and plan-implementation checklist are provided at the end of the guide. (RT)

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Making Middle Grades Matter
A Planning Guide for School Improvement

SREB

Introduction

Making Middle Grades Matter is a collaborative effort of the Southern Regional Education Board, member states and partner school districts to raise the achievement of middle grades students. The plight of these students is chronicled in four research reports[1] that SREB has distributed widely in the region and the nation. In these reports, SREB pointed out that middle grades students in the SREB states trail their counterparts nationally, and increasing numbers of students are unprepared to do high-quality work in high school.

In response to needs identified in the reports, SREB and its member states formed a middle grades consortium and developed a 10-point comprehensive improvement framework. (See page 2.) Each participating state, district and school has agreed to use the *Making Middle Grades Matter* "blueprint" in their improvement efforts, to share strategies that accelerate student achievement, and to build a strong support network across the region.

For several decades, schools have tried various programs and approaches in efforts to improve middle grades education. These programs have been unsuccessful for the most part because they did not focus clearly on raising student achievement and strengthening the academic core curriculum and classroom practices.

The goal of *Making Middle Grades Matter* is to raise the academic achievement of all middle grades students and to increase the percentages of students at the "basic" and "proficient" levels as defined by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.[2] *MMGM*'s framework is designed to identify school and classroom practices that accelerate student achievement. It includes three areas of emphasis:

- a challenging, coherent academic core curriculum delivered in ways that engage all students in learning;
- high expectations reinforced through quality extra help for students and professional development for teachers; and
- a guidance and support system for students and families demonstrating that "every student matters."

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1. The four reports are *Education's Weak Link: Student Achievement in the Middle Grades; Raising the Bar: Readiness for Success; Improving Teaching in the Middle Grades: Higher Standards for Students Aren't Enough; and Leading the Way: State Actions to Improve Student Achievement in the Middle Grades*. They are available from SREB separately or as a set. They are available also on the SREB Web site at <www.sreb.org>.

2. A student who scores at the "proficient" level has demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter and is well-prepared for the next level of schooling. A student who scores at the "basic" level has demonstrated only the fundamental knowledge and skills needed for the next level of schooling.

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Making Middle Grades Matter

Comprehensive Improvement Framework

- *An academic core that is aligned with rigorous content and performance standards* — All students in the middle grades must have academic core curricula that accelerate their learning, challenge them and appeal to their interests.

- *A belief that all students matter* — Each student needs to have a personal relationship with an adult mentor or advocate who takes an interest in his or her successful learning, goal-setting, career-planning and personal growth.

- *High expectations and a system of extra help and time* — Students learn in different ways and at different rates. It is important to provide enough time and help to give all students the opportunity to meet more rigorous, consistent standards.

- *Classroom practices that engage students in their learning* — Young adolescents need varied learning activities linked to challenging academic content, and they need opportunities to use new skills and concepts in "real-world" applications.

- *Teachers working together* — All teachers need time to plan together, to develop and coordinate learning activities, and to share student work that meets proficiency standards.

- *Support from parents* — Parents must have a clear understanding of and must support the higher standards for performance in the middle grades.

- *Qualified teachers* — Middle grades teachers must know both academic content and how to teach young adolescents.

- *Use of data* — States, districts and schools use data on student, school and teacher performance continuously to affirm or revise school and classroom practices that will improve student achievement.

- *Exploring and using technology* — Middle grades students and teachers must have opportunities to explore and use technology to improve knowledge and skills in English/language arts, reading, mathematics, science and social studies. Learning through activities and applications across the curriculum develops expertise in technology.

- *Strong leadership* — Middle grades schools need strong, effective principals who encourage teachers and actively participate with them in planning and implementing research-based improvements in school and classroom practices.

This planning guide was written to help school teams develop and implement comprehensive school-improvement plans based on the *MMGM* framework for student achievement. The guide contains six main sections:

- Setting the Stage for Change
- Identifying Practices That Need to Change
- Planning for Improvement
- Selecting a Priority for Continuous Improvement
- Developing and Implementing an Improvement Plan
- Creating a Climate for Continuous Improvement

Setting the Stage for Change

The first steps in changing something are to see the need for change and to present a vision of what can be accomplished. *Making Middle Grades Matter* calls for a comprehensive whole-school effort. Words such as "revise" and "accelerate" associated with the *MMGM* comprehensive improvement framework all signify change — for teachers, administrators, students, parents and the business community.

The tendency to prefer the known to the unknown is a natural response called resistance — a "fearful response" to change. Michael Fullan, who has researched and written extensively on the change process, says there are valid reasons for resistance. School teams embarking on a journey of improvement should take steps to overcome barriers that may arise.

A school planning team can ease fear and resistance by helping others see and understand what is driving change. The four SREB research reports on middle grades education and other state and local data provide reasons for change. Teachers, administrators and community members need to understand that there is "no going back" to the way things were done in the past. Education must move forward to incorporate skills and knowledge required for success in today's increasingly complex world.

Overcoming Barriers to Change

- Clarify the purpose for the change.
- Involve those who will be affected by change in the planning process.
- Base change on identified needs, research and professional standards.
- Acknowledge and address preferences in how work will be done and how change will occur.
- Communicate constantly regarding any change.
- Recognize work pressures and adjust schedules when possible.
- Be realistic about costs and look for both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards in making the change.
- Use data to build a rationale for change that will make the status quo uncomfortable.
- Be open and honest and build a climate of respect and trust for those initiating the change.

Starting a Conversation with Parents and the Community

Successful schools involve parents and community members in the change process. Local school councils that include parent and community members can invite others to join study groups, attend public forums and organize neighborhood meetings to discuss school issues. Some schools sponsor "brown-bag" lunch events where parents and teachers meet informally. Many schools use Web pages and other technology to facilitate communication. Schools that want to increase the flow of information and hold meetings for parents and the community can use the elements of the MMGM comprehensive improvement framework as a source of questions to begin the dialogue. For example:

- An academic core that is aligned with rigorous content and performance standards
  - *What evidence of readiness for high school should each student demonstrate by the end of the eighth grade?*
  - *Do grade-level performance criteria describe the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in high school?*
- High expectations and a system of extra help and time
  - *How does the school help students who have difficulty achieving the standards?*
  - *What types of support do students need and schools provide in the transition from elementary school to the middle grades and from the middle grades to high school?*
- Classroom practices that engage students in their learning
  - *How has the school changed what is taught, how it is taught and how performance is measured in preparing all students for high school?*
- Teachers working together
  - *Do teachers use criteria across classrooms and courses to evaluate students' work consistently?*
  - *Do all teachers expect high-quality work?*
  - *How does the school help teachers learn to use standards and performance criteria to plan instruction?*
- Support from parents
  - *What percentage of parents participate in school activities?*
  - *What types of activities involve parents?*
- Use of data
  - *What percentage of students complete Algebra I or pre-algebra by the end of the eighth grade?*
  - *What percentage of students read the equivalent of 25 books per year?*
  - *What percentage of students plan, conduct, analyze and report on scientific investigations?*
  - *What percentage of students complete a formal oral presentation that meets performance standards?*
  - *What percentage of students complete written research reports that meet performance standards?*
  - *What percentage of students prepare plans for academic and personal growth in high school?*
  - *What percentage of students use various research sources to explore issues, ideas and events?*
  - *What are the trends — from grade to grade and within grades — of indicators such as attendance, discipline referrals and standardized test scores?*

■ Strong leadership

- *Do leaders publish information on the number of students who meet content and performance standards?*
- *Do leaders report on how various groups of students perform in different subjects?*
- *Do the principal and teacher leaders use research and data to plan and implement improvement strategies that will engage students and raise achievement?*

SREB compared the achievement of eighth-graders in the 16 SREB states with the achievement of eighth-graders nationally. The findings showed that students in the SREB states are:

- more likely to be "below basic" in achievement;
- less likely to be "proficient" on grade-level tasks and materials;
- less able to apply scientific knowledge and reasoning; and
- less likely to have the reading skills to succeed in challenging high school work.

A rationale for change — where we are and where we should be going

Similarly, eighth-graders in SREB states:

- do less work in groups or teams;
- do less project-based work;
- write less and make fewer oral reports;
- have fewer discussions on materials they have read; and
- design and carry out fewer scientific investigations.

Characteristics of Teaching and Learning a Rigorous Curriculum in Middle Grades

The *Making Middle Grades Matter* framework calls for a rigorous academic curriculum that challenges students and accelerates their learning.

Mathematics: All students either complete Algebra I with acceptable performance or pass a pre-algebra proficiency test and use algebra concepts to reason and to solve problems.

Characteristics of teaching and learning

- Students demonstrate and apply mathematical concepts in various ways.
- Students demonstrate problem-solving and computational skills in solving non-routine, multi-step problems.
- Mathematics instruction includes manipulatives, mathematical models, simulations, investigations and use of graphing calculators.

Science: All students use laboratory and technology experiences to learn scientific concepts in physical, life and earth/space sciences.

Characteristics of teaching and learning

- Students plan, conduct, analyze and report on a scientific investigation.
- Students use scientific tools and technologies competently.
- Students demonstrate their understanding by using scientific concepts to explain observations, make predictions and present information in multiple ways.
- Students engage in scientific inquiry that involves investigating, observing and questioning.

Reading: Instruction for all students focuses on "academic literacy" across content areas.

Characteristics of teaching and learning

- Students read the equivalent of 25 books across content areas each year.
- Students read selections from multiple genres — fiction, nonfiction, poetry and drama.
- Students use a variety of strategies to understand what they read.
- Students read daily on their own.
- Reading assignments and instruction are required across the curriculum.

Language arts: All students use language arts skills — reading, writing, speaking and listening — to find, organize and report on information.

Characteristics of teaching and learning

- Students complete a research and writing task that meets clearly defined performance standards.
- Students analyze and revise their work regularly to improve its content and effect.
- Students complete a formal oral presentation that meets clearly defined performance standards.
- Students complete frequent, short-term writing assignments in all content areas.

Social studies: Before leaving the eighth grade, all students can describe their heritage, their government, their world and key economic principles by using issues from the past, present and future.

Characteristics of teaching and learning

- Students identify, describe, apply and use geographic representations, tools and technologies.
- Students develop and interpret maps, charts, models and databases.
- Students demonstrate the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
- Students describe chronological relationships and patterns and analyze the impact of key issues and events.

Identifying Practices That Need to Change

To establish a rationale and an urgency for change, schools must determine where the students and the school are in terms of the *MMGM* comprehensive improvement framework. A baseline assessment — which includes a thorough review of policies, practices and student achievement — will help schools identify and document their needs. Such an assessment provides critical information for developing an action plan, serves as a school profile that can be updated as new information becomes available, and allows school leaders and teachers to compare current and future achievement. A school improvement team should compile and share information that illustrates the need for change and inspires action by others. Test results, teacher survey findings and the school data profile will yield information on the percentages of students who can solve multistep mathematics problems, communicate orally and in writing, understand and apply scientific methods, and use technology effectively. School leaders will want to find the answers to three basic questions:

- How many students complete a rigorous core curriculum that prepares them for success in high school and beyond?
- How large is the gap between "what is" and "what should be" in terms of the *MMGM* comprehensive improvement framework?
- How do we plan to close the gap?

The differences between where the school is and where it should be in terms of student achievement and school practices will establish "the need." Data from multiple sources provides evidence of "what is" and describes the gaps that the school must address. Data can be found in norm- and criterion-referenced tests; student, parent and employer surveys; and meetings with high school and elementary school personnel concerning student performance. Schools should begin by gathering data to answer the following questions:

- What are the characteristics of your school? Who are the students? Who are the teachers? What are the community demographics? *Schools that develop a data profile get a clear picture of the school, the students and the community.*
- How many students meet content and performance standards? How do students in this school compare with students in the district, the state and the nation? *Schools that set standards and measure performance against state and/or national benchmarks, such as NAEP and the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), know how their students compare with students in other states and around the world.*
- How many students are ready for high school when they exit the eighth grade? How many take college-preparatory courses in high school? How many need extra help in high school? How many drop out of school after the ninth grade? *Schools that develop and disseminate annual "report cards" that show data on course failures, dropouts, suspensions/expulsions and attendance put their successes and challenges on public display and invite participation in comprehensive school reform.*
- What is expected of every student in this school? Are there guidelines for determining who needs extra help, who needs more time and who needs enrichment and advancement? How are expectations communicated to all students? How many students are failing one or more courses? Do these students have any characteristics in common? *Schools that disaggregate their data know whether students are receiving needed opportunities, resources and assistance.*
- What standards are students expected to meet? Are these standards communicated clearly to parents and students? *Schools should post standards in classrooms, share examples of high-quality student work with parents and students, and provide information to parents on the school's expectations for all students.*

- How many levels of English, mathematics and science does the school offer? Do the various levels have different assignments and expectations? Do all students have access to all courses if they are interested and willing to make the effort, or are some students assigned to courses according to their test scores? *Schools promote high expectations when they enroll all students in challenging studies but vary the pace and the level of teacher support based on students' readiness and interests.*

- Are students engaged in a variety of learning tasks aimed at developing conceptual understanding? Do students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate applications of learned skills? *High-achieving schools engage students in active and thoughtful learning that is useful and interesting. Rigorous courses and instruction develop critical thinking and communication skills, emphasize real-world applications and integrate learning across content areas.*

- Does the school have a support system for students who need assistance in meeting standards? *Schools that require struggling students to attend after-school tutorial sessions or Saturday classes provide support while holding students accountable for meeting standards.*

- How is the school organized for optimal teaching and learning? Does the schedule "protect" instructional time? Is the schedule flexible ? *Schools that want to raise achievement should consider adopting a schedule that includes longer class periods and varied instruction within a block of time that can be adjusted to fit instructional needs. Such schedules can eliminate wasted time at the beginning and end of class and provide time for teachers to plan, to teach and to assess results together.*

- Is the school's professional development plan linked to identified needs? Does the plan support teachers in using new content, instructional and/or assessment skills? *A professional development plan should be based on the school's characteristics and the students' needs. It should help teachers develop deep understanding of content and should provide support for teachers as they try new teaching methods.*

After collecting data and perceptions on school practices and student performance, a school team can begin making plans to achieve its vision for the school and the students.

Planning for Improvement

Successful change cannot be imposed; it must be shaped by the people it will affect. Most schools establish a team or committee structure to coordinate and monitor implementation of various aspects of the plan. Teams need a clear mission, specific objectives and enough time to function effectively. They also need support and rewards for their hard work.

Each *Making Middle Grades Matter* site designates one person as a site coordinator to serve as the school's primary contact with SREB. The site coordinator shares information, resources and requests from SREB with administrators, the school improvement team and study groups.

A school improvement team develops a vision of a high-performing school and finds ways to use the vision in daily life at the school. The team may be an existing school improvement team or a site-based management council. Other committees or study groups tackle specific tasks. For example, a study group might look at how to schedule extra help before, during and after school. Another group or committee might investigate how to meet the faculty's professional development needs. A multi-team structure involves everyone in the school improvement process, promotes buy-in and builds consensus for change. It also reduces the time commitment of individual teachers and minimizes faculty burnout.

Schools make more progress in school improvement and teamwork when they orient and train team leaders and members in topics such as building trust, planning for action and conducting effective meetings. Middle grades schools that use the team-teaching approach may be tempted to skip the team-development process; however, this process builds productive relationships among local and district personnel who may not have had many opportunities to work together.

How One School Team Organized for Improvement

The school improvement team at one Kentucky middle grades school includes teachers from the school's interdisciplinary teams and special programs such as technology. Students and parents also serve on the team. The team structure includes a number of committees that involve many representatives of the school and the community. Several committees were organized to gather data and make recommendations for school improvement. One committee comprised of content-area teachers reviewed and assessed data related to their instructional area. Parents and community leaders serve on a committee designed to improve communication between the school and the community. Other committees assemble data on budgets, textbooks, professional development and special services.

As the change process begins, everyone must understand that there is neither a "right way" nor a "road map" for accomplishing what needs to be done. The important thing is to focus on the destination — higher student achievement. In maintaining the focus, team members from the school and the community should deal in facts and evidence instead of personalities and suppositions. Teams must be precise in identifying and analyzing problems. In doing so, they will find that most problems emanate from "the system" rather than from individuals. Fullan calls the change process a "guided journey" that takes place when schools "do, then plan...and do and plan some more." Whether the school reaches the ultimate destination depends upon continuous improvement, a culture that supports change, and school leaders and teachers who can solve problems.

Developing a Common Language

Effective schools have communication and problem-solving procedures that build common purpose and understanding. For example, successful schools encourage input from teachers and use that information to solve problems and make decisions. These schools also establish horizontal and vertical teams that include teacher representatives from multiple content areas and grade levels as well as administrators, parents and community representatives. In addition to providing a broad base for listening and acting, the teams promote a common "language" that unites everyone in working to achieve school-improvement goals. Fullan suggests that when such groups have authority, they help manage change through better communication and closer links to other efforts.

Finding Time to Plan

Teamwork has many advantages, such as individual pride and satisfaction, open communication, increased productivity and a clear focus on student achievement. However, teams require a lot of time — a scarce resource. Districts and schools need to reallocate and retool existing resources and acquire new ones to provide time for teams to develop, implement and evaluate planned changes. Middle grades leaders must become more aggressive in pointing out the need for time and other resources to help teachers address the educational needs of young adolescents.

Finding Time for Teachers to Work and Plan Together

Effective schools find time for teachers to work and plan together. Here are three ways:

- Revise the schedule. A block schedule eliminates much of the between-class time that is needed in a traditional schedule and adds 15 to 20 minutes to the school day. Another way to find time is to extend the school day or the school year. One Arkansas middle grades school added a period a day for enrichment and remediation.
- Alter staffing patterns. One middle grades school identified a reading problem, reallocated staff and hired a reading specialist to screen new students and recommend ways to raise their reading achievement. Teachers plan better instruction during the time they save by not having to screen and refer students.
- Establish business and postsecondary partnerships. Business and university personnel can save teachers time by providing instruction and monitoring students' activities. One middle grades school that is seeking to raise mathematics and science achievement enlists business partners as "guest teachers" in their areas of expertise while teachers participate in planning meetings and professional development activities.

Selecting a Priority for Continuous Improvement

The school-improvement team's next step is to address a particular curricular or instructional challenge. The team has already:

- presented a rationale for change and communicated an urgency for action;
- shared data to confirm strengths and to identify areas that need improvement;
- involved the entire school and the community in discussing and talking about change;
- assessed the school's strengths and challenges and developed a school profile;
- identified indicators of student learning and readiness for high school; and
- motivated teachers to think and act in new ways.

When people accept the need for change, they begin to focus on action and results. They think about ways to improve school and classroom practices and to raise student achievement and start developing specific proposals for action. Any discussions concerning possible actions should include projections of intended and unintended consequences, potential pitfalls and costs.

After reviewing the data, the school team develops problem statements and selects a few areas that require action. Examples of problem statements are:

- Teachers do not agree on student work that meets standards.
- The school works better for some students than for others.
- Technology is not integrated into lessons, assignments and projects.

Problem statements should be linked to the elements of the *MMGM* comprehensive improvement framework. For example, a problem statement might be, "Students are unable to use algebra concepts to reason and to solve problems." In response to the identified problem, a school could

decide to implement a standards-based mathematics curriculum. The implementation plan would identify multiple actions for addressing several elements of the *MMGM* comprehensive improvement framework.

The following examples represent framework elements and suggested actions that relate to a mathematics goal:

- An academic core that is aligned with rigorous content and performance standards

  Possible action: Map the mathematics curriculum for kindergarten through grade 12, examine student work, and set grade-level content and performance standards.

- High expectations and a system of extra help and time

  Possible action: Offer "algebra for all" and provide assistance before, during and after the school day and year.

- Classroom practices that engage students in their learning

  Possible action: Plan staff development to help teachers implement new strategies for teaching mathematics, such as the TIMSS instructional model and collaborative learning groups.

- Teachers working together

  Possible action: Create study groups of teachers to examine student work and critique instructional plans.

- Support from parents

  Possible action: Include parents in professional development activities. Invite them to join teachers in examining student work. Schedule a "mathematics night" to present new learning standards and to demonstrate new materials.

Strategic decision-making begins with the "big picture" and becomes increasingly specific. In selecting a focus for continuous improvement, the school improvement team will set short- and long-term goals, determine measurable performance indicators, identify teaching and learning strategies, and develop an action plan. The team will work with administrators, teachers, students, parents and community representatives to define the major improvements the school expects to make in the next three years.

Developing and Implementing an Improvement Plan

A comprehensive school-improvement plan should address all elements of the *MMGM* comprehensive improvement framework. The plan should include benchmarks for student achievement; a staff development plan to help teachers learn new content, instructional strategies and ways to assess student achievement; ways to identify and assist struggling students; and methods of informing parents and gaining their support for the changes.

The action plan for comprehensive school improvement should include a priority goal statement, a rationale or need for the action, and a benchmark statement of projected outcomes. The plan should also include:

- indicators to measure progress in reaching the goal;
- actions and strategies for addressing the goal;
- person(s) responsible for implementing and monitoring the actions;
- a time frame for implemeting the actions;
- costs and resources; and
- ways to evaluate the actions.

The forms on pages 14-16 will be helpful to school teams in developing an action plan. The blank form on page 14 can be photocopied and used in creating a local plan. The form on page 15 gives guidelines for the types of information to place in each column. The sample action plan on page 16 provides examples of strategies to address a specific goal.

MMGM school improvement plans need to be aligned with other improvement efforts in the school, the district and the state. Whenever possible, they should be based on existing plans rather than started from scratch. The team should review existing plans for accuracy and clarity and revise and expand them as needed. As the implementation gets under way and continues, the team can use a checklist to determine which parts of the plan have been completed. (See the checklist on pages 17 and 18.)

SREB encourages schools to use a 90-day "fast-track" process for school improvement. Since the middle grades framework is a "doing" document, the plan should focus on "doing" things such as addressing priority goals, collecting data on actions taken, and revisiting and revising the plan to improve teaching and learning.

A fast-track plan has various levels of specificity. Short-term actions for the first year will be more specific because they must be implemented first and will happen more quickly. Long-term actions for the first year may be less specific, but they will be reviewed, revised and expanded as the team gathers new data and documents progress on short-term actions. The *MMGM* comprehensive improvement framework is just that — a framework. As the school improvement structure is gradually built over time, all elements of the comprehensive improvement framework must be addressed to sustain growth in student achievement. **The plan should address all elements of the framework within three years.**

Fast-track Planning

First 30 days:

- Orient the faculty to the *Making Middle Grades Matter* comprehensive improvement framework.
- Work with the faculty to set priorities for school improvement.

Second 30 days:

- Develop short- and long-term actions for the first three years.
- Present the draft plan to the faculty and the superintendent.
- Receive feedback and revise the plan.

Third 30 days:

- Complete the plan.
- Present the plan to the faculty and the school board.
- Submit the plan to the state *MMGM* coordinator.

Creating a Climate for Continuous Improvement

The day-to-day process of implementing the school improvement plan should be monitored carefully to ensure that the school is adhering to the time line, using identified strategies and reaching goals outlined in the plan. As the team measures progress, it can revise the plan as needed.

Change is not an event; it is a continuous process best accomplished through planning, doing and reviewing by all groups affected by the change.

Change should be data-driven: What do we know about what works and does not work in schools today? How do we know it? Unless school leaders and teachers can answer these questions, they cannot hope to develop plans and implement actions that will be successful. Observers of change know that success often depends on paying attention to "the little things." Many small actions can lead to major successes in student learning — actions such as making sure students are seated and ready to begin class on time, requiring students to redo work to meet clear standards, and designing homework that reinforces and enriches learning.

Successful change builds on current assets and is tailored to the school and the community. Just as students differ in how they learn and the speed at which they progress, schools have different strengths and needs. Schools need the authority to develop tailor-made plans that adhere to district, state and national goals. They also deserve the support of the local board of education, the district office, the community and the state department of education in implementing their plans. A shared vision and a consistent message will accelerate the rate of change and result in higher student achievement.

ACTION PLAN FORMAT

School _____ Year _____

Priority Goal:

Rationale/Need:

Benchmark:

Readiness Indicators	Actions/Strategies	Person(s) Responsible	Time Frame	Costs and Resources	Evaluation Instruments and Processes

GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPING AN ACTION PLAN

School _____ Year _____

Priority Goal — the *MMGM* Comprehensive Improvement Framework element to be addressed

Rationale/Need — a problem statement that incorporates data identifying the need for action

Benchmark — a measurable statement that tells who, what, when and how much in terms of reaching the goal. For example, how much growth in student achievement is expected? Include a time frame for reaching the goal.

Readiness Indicators	Actions/Strategies	Person(s) Responsible	Time Frame	Costs and Resources	Evaluation Instruments and Processes
Link two or three readiness indicators that relate to the priority goal. Indicators are results you hope to obtain.	List specific steps you will take to achieve the goal.	Identify the person(s) who will be responsible for taking action and monitoring progress.	Tell how long it will take to plan and implement the action(s) and monitor the results.	Tell what the action(s) will cost in terms of materials, time and personnel.	Tell how to assess the benefits of the school improvement plan. The benchmark statement should guide the development of the evaluation. Document the number of students who meet standards.

SAMPLE ACTION PLAN

School _____ Year _____

Priority Goal: All students in the middle grades will complete an academic core curriculum that will accelerate their learning, challenge them to work hard and appeal to their interests.

Rationale/Need: Forty-three percent of eighth-graders score at the "acceptable" level on the state writing assessment. The school's largest achievement gap is in writing.

Benchmark: Eighty percent of eighth-graders will perform at the "acceptable" level on the writing assessment as defined by the state. All students will complete a writing task at a specific performance level described in district guidelines.

Readiness Indicators	Actions/Strategies	Person(s) Responsible	Time Frame	Costs and Resources	Evaluation Instruments and Processes
1. All students annually will complete a formal research and writing task that will meet clearly defined standards.	1.1 Develop criteria for student performance on a research and writing task	English/language arts teachers in grades six through eight	Summer 2000	An hourly stipend for team members: ___ teachers @ $ ____ per day or hour	Communication with teachers, students and parents concerning the criteria for the task
	1.2 Develop student scoring guides or rubrics based on performance criteria	English/language arts teachers in grades six through eight	Summer 2000	An hourly stipend for team members: ___ teachers @ $ ____ per day or hour. Tasks 1.1 and 1.2 should take no more than 40 hours	A scoring guide that teachers, students and parents can use
	1.3 Make the task specific to grade levels and performance criteria	A curriculum team composed of English/language arts teachers with input from fine and related arts and English/language arts teachers in grades five and nine	Summer 2000	An hourly stipend for the curriculum team: five teachers @ $ ____ per day or hour, not to exceed two days	Increasing complexity of tasks at each grade level
	1.4 Present a draft to the faculty for input and revision.	The curriculum team	Fall 2000	Before-school workdays at no extra cost	Teachers' comments
	1.5 Develop assignments and a time frame for completing the components of the task and a final product	Grade-level teams and/or English/language arts teachers	Fall 2000	Regular planning time at no extra cost	Unit and lesson plans
	1.6 Determine each student's performance level	Grade-level teams and/or English/language arts teachers	Spring 2001	Professional development time at no extra cost	Analysis of students' scores to revise the task and students' assignments

A Checklist for Implementing a Comprehensive School-improvement Plan

This checklist will help site coordinators and school improvement teams at *Making Middle Grades Matter* sites complete a planning process and take action to prepare all middle grades students for the challenges of high school and beyond.

_____ Orient the staff to *Making Middle Grades Matter* and the comprehensive improvement framework.

_____ Agree to implement the framework.

- Was the school's decision to join *MMGM* based on a commitment to improve student achievement?
- Did the staff reach consensus after discussing the framework?

_____ Recruit and organize a school-improvement team.

- Does the team represent the school and the community?
- Is the site coordinator a strong leader who is committed to teamwork and participatory decision-making?
- Are key administrators in the school and the district open to change and willing to provide the necessary support?
- Is the school improvement team ready to work together and to involve the rest of the faculty in making decisions?
- Will the team need committees or study groups to support the work?

_____ Conduct a comprehensive baseline assessment.

- Have questions been identified to guide the assessment process?
- Have challenging content and performance standards for all students been identified or developed?
- Did the baseline assessment identify the school's strengths as well as challenges?
- Does the school have a process for examining the data?
- Does the school have a process for obtaining additional data?

_____ Analyze data from the comprehensive baseline assessment.

- Do the data support the team's conclusions?
- Are the data organized by gender, socioeconomic status and special needs to help determine if there are differences in how students are taught?

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_____ Develop an action plan for continuous improvement.

- Do all teachers, students and parents understand what will happen as a result of the planned changes?
- Does the plan focus on significant increases in achievement for all students?
- Was the entire faculty involved in designing and developing actions to address identified needs and challenges?
- Is there a benchmark for each priority goal?
- Are content and performance standards aligned with state and/or national standards?
- Does the plan contain support systems such as guidance and advisement, parent involvement, and extra help and time?
- Does the professional development plan support the goals?
- Has the team identified the resources and time that will be needed to implement the plan?

_____ Align the plan with state and local improvement efforts.

_____ Include a way to evaluate whether students are making progress in meeting content and performance standards.

- Does the plan include an assessment and accountability section that tells how to collect baseline data and how to gather additional data in subsequent years?
- Does the evaluation plan include a process for sharing results of improvement efforts with parents and the community?